

Script for “Sara in Siberia” (episode 8: broadcast September 19, 2018)

Laurie Bernstein (LB): At the end of the last episode, we saw how Sara and her mother, having joined the October 1941 wartime exodus from Moscow, traveled by freight train to Siberia and found themselves with nowhere to live. Invited to the remote mining town of Cheremkhovo by three young women, sisters they knew from back home, Sara and Gita schlepped another 900 miles east, only to find no one waiting to greet them. We left Sara about to give up on hearing from the friends who had invited them out there in the first place.

And that’s when a letter from the youngest of the sisters, Valya, arrived. She was on her way. They had been evacuated to a tiny village she called Buryanguty, and they had had no idea how complicated it was during the winter to get from there to Cheremkhovo, the town that *seemed* like the nearest stop on the Trans-Siberian railway line. As it turned out, an ice-choked, unnavigable river lay between.

Sara Mebel (SM): [in Russian] “Boats weren’t going across the Angara River because there was sludge – hunks of ice that a boat couldn’t navigate around. From that Buryanguty, you had to make a big circle through Irkutsk.”¹

LB: Only from there could you cross the river and get a train to Cheremkhovo. That still didn’t fully explain Valya’s lateness. I asked Sara about this. She pondered the question aloud. Was it that Valya’s two sisters couldn’t leave the teaching jobs they’d found in Buryanguty? Maybe Valya, who was still just in tenth grade, had to wait for a school break? But then it occurred to Sara what happened.

SM: “I know why! It was a long trip, and there was no railroad. They had to wait until someone was en route to Irkutsk – by horse.”²

LB: That’s how remote it was. Until 1939, Buryanguty – whose actual name was Buryat Yanguty - had been part of a combined Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. By 1941, it had been incorporated into Russia’s Irkutsk province. Not surprisingly, the post was unreliable, and so letters between Sara and her friends just weren’t being delivered.

It’s December of 1941. Valya, wrapped in her winter coat, finally arrives in Cheremkhovo.

SM: “When she took off her coat, it turned out that she was only wearing underwear beneath it. She had stayed in a hotel in Irkutsk ... Someone in that hotel had stolen her skirt.”³

LB: Sara sounded as though this was a standard hotel experience. She hadn't stayed in many hotels during her life, and Sara clearly associated them not with clean sheets, Gideon's bibles, and room service, but with thieves and drunkards. We saw this in action when she stayed in her own room at Manhattan's Roosevelt Hotel in 2004, the night before my mother-in-law's funeral. (Just another reminder of the family connection here: my mother-in-law was Sara's first cousin.) Sometime in the middle of the night, she was woken by a woman who was screaming and banging on the door. When Sara reported this to us the next morning, she sounded casual, like criminal and scandalous behavior was par for the course if you stayed in a *hotel*.

SM: "She was drunk, no doubt."⁴

LB: But let's go back to Cheremkhovo. Valya showed up, and now Sara and her mother had to make a decision about whether to stay there or follow Valya back to Buryanguty. A lot depended on how they were going to earn their living during the war, especially on whether Gita could find work in her field as a midwife. Buryanguty seemed like a good possibility.

SM: "Maybe Mama could find work at a medical point there."⁵

LB: But Gita was still on crutches. Sara decided to go with Valya to check things out.

That 17-year-old Valya and the Sara who, as we have seen, still considered herself a child in relation to her mother, made it to Buryanguty is incredible. They decided to avoid the train and the long way through Irkutsk, going instead in a direct line across the Angara River. They managed to convince a reluctant boatman to take them across.

SM: "We two idiots . . . persuaded him... When we got to the middle of the river, it was terrifying, terrifying! There were chunks of ice everywhere. But we got across safely. Nothing happened. We made it."⁶

LB: Valya's sister Maria was waiting for them on the other side.

SM: "With a horse."⁷

LB: It was an "old, sick" horse that was not thrilled to be dragging the three of them through the snow. The young women had to trick it into moving, using a creative form of the carrot and the stick, although without, it would appear, the stick.

SM: “We took turns running in front, dangling before it a piece of hay.”⁸

LB: After a couple of days, they arrived in Buryanguty, at which point Sara joined Valya, Maria, and the other sister, whose name was Shura, in their one room in a wooden hut. The wall dividing the four of them from the hut’s other room didn’t reach the ceiling and so everything anyone said or did was audible. In that other room were the owners of the hut, ethnic Buryats who spoke a dialect of the Mongolian language. A stove heated the hut, but because the windows were kept closed and the flue from the chimney was only partially open, the whole place was always filled with smoke and fumes. The polluted, stifling air nauseated Sara and gave her headaches.

Though the young women’s room was so close to their hosts, they lived completely separate lives, socializing and eating separately. Sara, who usually thought of herself as different from ethnic Russians because of her Jewish background, felt so foreign in the situation that she included herself as among the only Russians in the village. Unlike their Buryat hosts, she and her fellow Russians – that is, the three sisters - subsisted on the bread rations they received as evacuees.

SM: “We were half starved.”⁹

LB: There was apparently no way just to buy bread, and their rations weren’t enough. But it sounds like boredom was their worst problem. They were young and they were far, far away from everybody they loved and everything they knew. They were in a part of the Soviet Union that was still considered alien and wild by European standards. There were even rumors about local bandits who kidnapped women.

SM: “Shura would sit in front of the hut’s window and say, ‘Lord, why don’t the bandits come for *me*?’ It was *that* boring!”¹⁰

LB: It’s hard to imagine they didn’t also joke about the three sisters in Anton Chekhov’s play who keep saying how desperate they are to get back to Moscow. Hearing about Sara’s stay in Buryanguty, I had to remind myself that their country was at war. What about the war?

SM: “The war didn’t touch us there.”¹¹

LB: But wasn’t she reading the newspaper?

SM: “Newspapers? I don’t remember.”¹²

LB: She thought again.

SM: “There *were* no newspapers in Buryanguty¹³.”

LB: She did, however, listen to the radio.

SM: “I listened to the news every day about the retreat, how we gave up this city, how we gave up that city.”¹⁴

LB: I asked whether she knew anyone at the front. This elicited an emphatic,

SM: “Of course!”¹⁵

LB: And then she told me about a Moscow “comrade,” someone she emphasized was not a boyfriend, just in case I was getting ideas and was going to ask her about sex. He had filled out a form claiming her as his wife so she could get additional rations while he was at the front. But he only knew her as Sara Mebel – he had no idea how to answer the question on the form about her patronymic, the middle name that Russians use to address each other in a formal way.

SM: “They laughed over there in Moscow. What kind of husband doesn’t know his wife’s name?”¹⁶

LB: Sara stayed with her friends in Buryanguty for around a month, and then they all decided to move to Cheremkhovo. Sara was very worried about her mother who was on her own with a broken leg, so she left first – alone. She found some Buryat peasants at the local market who agreed to take her back to Cheremkhovo for free – on their horse-drawn sled.

This was not a comfortable way to travel. It took them several days, and it was still winter. It was still freezing. How did she manage?

SM: “When I was very cold, I would run alongside the horses.”¹⁷

LB: They slept in peasant huts along the way. Sara still sounded bitter over the fact that even though her traveling companions had meat, milk, and bread, not once did they offer her any of their food.

SM: “Not one time, ‘*Devochka*, have a piece of bread, have a piece of meat.’”¹⁸

LB: So she ate her own bread and the frozen milk she brought along. Wait, I asked: frozen milk?

SM: “They used to pour milk into these big, usually round cups and put them in the snow. The milk would freeze.”¹⁹

LB: They would do the same thing with meat-filled dumplings – *pel'meni*. Sara recalled that Anna Grigor'evna, their host-by-order-of-the-soviet back in Cheremkhovo, would make hundreds at a time and bury them in the snow to keep them from spoiling. Needless to say, no one had refrigerators.

When Sara made it back to Cheremkhovo, she was thrilled to see that Gita was walking again and had managed to find work as a sanitary inspector for the municipal department of public health. They had to construct some kind of lives in Siberia because no one knew how long the war would continue and how long they would be kept out of Moscow. But this wasn't easy. Sara had a painful sense of her life slipping further off the rails. She told me how she saw the 1941 British film *That Hamilton Woman* starring Vivien Leigh while they were all in Cheremkhovo. The tragedy of Lady Hamilton's fall from the upper reaches of British society really spoke to Sara, who had lost her father in the Stalinist Terror and who was now in the middle of a place she considered nowhere, waiting out a war that the USSR was losing. By 1942, the Germans controlled virtually *all* the European continent.

At some point her three friends in Buryanguty made it to Cheremkhovo and found their own place to live. Shura got a job teaching math and physics in a local technical college. Sara thinks that Valya went back to school.

But before her two sisters arrived, Maria came to town and promptly moved into Sara and Gita's room in Anna Grigor'evna's hut. Maria and Sara both found jobs in the local meat-processing plant where their landlady's son already worked in the sausage-making section.

SM: “Imagine what an advantage that was during the war!”²⁰

LB: There would always be meat on the table for Anna Grigor'evna and her son Vasya.

Ironically, the young women's job in the meat-processing plant didn't provide access to meat. Sara and Maria were assigned to a department that fashioned combs and buttons from the bones of the slaughtered animals. There was nothing to glean from the sausage-making section for them, and they often went hungry. Maria and Sara would come home from work famished and plead with Gita

for the whole of their daily bread ration. But Gita would refuse. It was important to save some for breakfast.

Yes, Gita remained in charge, now controlling the food of *two* grown women. Only when Sara described the scene to me did it occur to her that her mother was probably giving them part of her own bread ration.

The meat-processing plant ran on a 24-hour schedule, with workers on three rotating eight-hour shifts. This meant that Sara and Maria sometimes worked at night.

Their job in the factory involved placing an item inside a lathe and holding it while the lathe turned. The factory was really cold, and so Sara and Maria would wrap themselves in shawls and wear mittens on their hands. One time, Sara's mitten got caught in the machine, and Maria saved Sara's hand by pulling the off-switch in the nick of time.

Sara didn't remain a proletarian for very long. As was her experience when she was taken off the wartime production line in the machine shop of the seismology institute in Moscow, the bosses at the plant quickly promoted her: to controller. There was still no meat to bring home, but now she worked in a small office lined with shelves that held the combs and buttons they manufactured.

I assumed that Sara, the Muscovite with two years of higher education under her belt, would have felt like a fish out of water among members of the working class in a small Siberian town. But she said this wasn't the case.

SM: "We have a very good Russian expression: never consider someone else more stupid than yourself, or you'll be the moron. I believe that."²¹

LB: Yes, she was more educated and better read, but they were all young and they apparently became friends – or at least had friendly relations. She told me a story that illustrated this, along with what she admitted was her youth and naiveté.

As someone with an actual office, Sara let her co-workers store their lunch and personal items on her shelves. One day she accidentally broke open a fellow worker's package and found that it not only contained a meal, but *combs* that the plant manufactured - that is, state property. She was controller; this was on her.

SM: "What should I do? Stealing isn't permitted, but I also couldn't bring myself to tell someone straight to her face, 'You're a thief!'"²²

LB: This really upset her. After some agonized reasoning, she wound up deciding not to turn the person in. There was a war on. The young woman who had stolen the combs could have been in for some very serious penalties. So when the

package's owner came to retrieve it, Sara solemnly reassured her that she would keep this between them, but that the combs needed to be given back.

The young woman handed Sara the combs and walked out of the office without saying a word. When Sara went to the factory floor a few minutes later, she noticed that all the workers, the "boys and girls" as she called them, were laughing. The thief not only hadn't been chastened, she had blabbed about her encounter with Sara to *all* their co-workers, who found it hilarious. A light went on in Sara's brain. She had seen combs and buttons from the factory for sale at the local market. *All* the boys and girls were pocketing and selling state property.

Sara had experience with a more serious criminal when her landlady's son Vanya returned from prison and, of course, moved right back to the hut. Vanya, who Sara believed had been convicted of murder, was around 30 years old, and he clearly enjoyed having an attractive young Muscovite in his house. Vanya would wait outside the meat-processing plant to walk Sara home at the end of her night shift, and he would ask her to tell him stories about life in faraway Moscow.

She was hanging out with an ex-con who had been in prison for murder? Weren't she and her mother afraid of him? Evidently not – just like Sara had an explanation for the woman banging on her door at the Roosevelt Hotel, she had one for Vanya's crime.

SM: "Maybe he'd been drunk?"²³

LB: I couldn't help but wonder if Sara and this young man she described as a tall *muzhik* had a romance. All I learned from her was,

SM: "He always behaved like a gentleman."²⁴

LB: Vanya even saved Sara and her mother when they lost the card that entitled them to their bread rations. No card, no bread. No bread? That opened the door to even greater hunger. But Vanya gave them *his* card. Sara told him,

SM: "I can't accept it. How will *you* survive?"²⁵

LB: Vanya had it covered. He got a job in Cheremkhovo's bread factory and so he didn't have to worry about his rations.

SM: "Do you think I gave it back to him? I still have it. That means we survived because of his card."²⁶

LB: Sara was adamant that the government wouldn't have helped them in any way, shape, or form. She and her mother were, however, entitled to eat lunch in a cafeteria. It didn't serve bread and the food was dreadful, but at least the cafeteria provided hot food in the form of soup and some kind of main course, often made from the byproducts of the animals they slaughtered at the plant. One dish *resembled* a piece of meat, but it was blood that had been dried and salted, and then fried like a cutlet.

I wanted to know what would have happened to their diet if Vanya hadn't given them his card.

SM: "We would have eaten only potatoes."²⁷

LB: They had potatoes! In the spring of 1942, they planted potatoes. They farmed? Like peasants?

Sara patiently explained that just outside town they had been given a small plot of land and dibs on a horse that helped them prepare the soil for planting. They were novices at farming, but they watched what others did and they managed to come up with a crop of their own. By the time the potatoes were ready to harvest in autumn 1942, they had moved to their own one-room Cheremkhovo apartment. There, they cooked the potatoes on a kerosene burner.

I asked, was there a bathroom?

As always, Sara found this kind of question weird and rude. But my curiosity about toilets was rooted in my experiences as a foreigner in the 1980s Soviet Union who couldn't get over what I encountered in public bathrooms. In our dormitory, designated as it was for "capitalist foreigners," there was a bathroom with several stalls on each floor. Each commode had a detachable wooden seat that the Soviets in the dorm tended to leave on the floor. There was no toilet paper, but sometimes people kindly left pieces of newspaper for others' use. Newspaper, of course, could not be flushed. Our toilets were cleaned regularly by the dormitory janitor, but the bathroom still wasn't a place you'd want to linger.

No one came to clean the toilets in the neighboring "socialist foreigners" dormitory. One resident, a grad student from East Germany I met in a Russian language class, snapped a Polaroid photo late one night of one of their stalls. Let's just say it looked like the surrounding area had gotten more use than the actual toilet.

Public facilities tended to be equally gross. Outside the big cities, we weren't surprised to find dirty troughs and pits, but things weren't much better in what was then known as Leningrad, the elegant northern capital. The stench of urine greeted me every time I entered the building of the prestigious language faculty at Leningrad State University. I basically structured my day around pit stops to the

nearby hotels designed for foreign visitors. There, you could find clean stalls and even toilet paper.

Most of my Soviet friends lived in one room of what had been designated as “communal apartments,” which meant they shared the kitchen and bathrooms with the other tenants. These also weren’t very nice. Only in the apartment blocks that were going up in the city’s outskirts did people have their own bathrooms, and these tended to be clean because only *one* family was using them. But outside of the fancy hotels for foreigners, no one had toilet paper. When I went to the USSR for my nine-month stay, I came armed with packages of tissues and several rolls of toilet paper that I parceled out for myself very carefully.

Needless to say, there was no toilet paper when the Mebels lived in their Krasnogorsk barracks.

SM: “No one even knew what it was. I brought a piece of newspaper with me, and sometimes there was [newspaper] attached to a nail.”²⁸

LB: She was a little defensive about this. One time she insisted to me that there’s no way my father, who was a few years older than she and who grew up as the son of Jewish immigrants in New York City, had toilet paper in the 1920s and 30s. So I called him and I asked. Eighty-seven-year-old Sylvester Bernstein thought for a minute and then, in a mock serious tone, said, “I can’t speak for the people in Brooklyn, but in the Bronx we had toilet paper.”

No. Sara and Gita didn’t have a bathroom in their Cheremkhovo place. They used an outhouse, just as they had done when they lived with Anna Grigor’evna.

Next time, we’ll look at Sara’s experiences in Cheremkhovo’s public welfare department and what awaited Sara and her mother when the war finally ended.

¹ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

² From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

³ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

⁴ Recollection of Bob Weinberg and Laurie Bernstein

⁵ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

⁶ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

⁷ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

⁸ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

⁹ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002

¹⁰ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002

¹¹ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

¹² From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

¹³ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

¹⁴ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

¹⁵ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

¹⁶ From taped conversation of July 28, 2002

¹⁷ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002

¹⁸ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002

- ¹⁹ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002
- ²⁰ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002
- ²¹ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002
- ²² From taped conversation of July 29, 2002
- ²³ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002
- ²⁴ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002
- ²⁵ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002
- ²⁶ From taped conversation of July 29, 2002
- ²⁷ From taped conversation of July 31, 2002
- ²⁸ From taped conversation of July 23, 2002